



By Zoe Tillman, *Legal Times*

# Public Funding for D.C. Civil Legal Aid On the Rise

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Landlord Tenant Resource Center at D.C. Superior Court. *Photo: Zoe Tillman/NLJ*

Nearly \$3.9 million in publicly funded grants were awarded this year to legal services groups that work with some of Washington's poorest and most vulnerable residents.

The Access to Justice Grant Program is funded by the D.C. Council and administered by the D.C. Bar Foundation. The amount of money set aside annually for these grants has steadily risen since 2011; last year, the council approved about \$3.4 million.

Twenty-four projects run by local civil legal-services groups received grants this year totaling \$3.86 million, including five new projects. The grantees were announced this month.

One of the single largest grants will fund a new project to increase access to counsel in eviction cases. Three organizations—Bread for the City, Legal Aid Society of the District of Columbia and Legal Counsel for the Elderly—will receive \$310,000 to hire new lawyers. Those lawyers will work with volunteers from D.C. law firms to provide pro bono legal representation to tenants in subsidized housing facing eviction.

Unlike criminal cases, where defendants are guaranteed a lawyer, no such right exists in most civil cases. D.C. Superior Court statistics show that although most landlords are represented by a lawyer in housing disputes, tenants overwhelmingly are not. Beth Harrison, an attorney with Legal Aid, said legal-services providers decided to focus on tenants in subsidized housing facing eviction because their cases can be more complex. “In the vast majority of cases, if you lose the eviction case, you’re not just losing an apartment, you’re probably losing the subsidy,” Harrison said. Losing a subsidy can send tenants and their families into a “cycle of long-term homelessness,” she said, a problem exacerbated by the city’s shrinking stock of affordable housing.

There are approximately 4,000 to 5,000 eviction cases filed annually in Superior Court that might be eligible for the program, Harrison said. In the first year, she said their goal is to offer representation to tenants in a minimum of 500 cases, or about 10 percent. Over time, they hope to expand the number of participating pro bono lawyers and increase the percentage of tenants who are offered services.

“We’re hoping we can build a community of lawyers at law firms who are working on this project and can collaborate with us on an ongoing basis,” Harrison said.

Bread for the City and Legal Aid Society also received a separate \$585,500 grant to support their ongoing work providing legal services in landlord-and-tenant cases.

Another new project funded this year is focused on meeting the legal needs of transgender clients. Whitman-Walker Health will receive \$69,500 to support its work with transgender individuals. Those services include helping clients change their name and gender on driver’s licenses and other legal documents and fighting discrimination in employment and health care, said Daniel Bruner, senior director of policy.

“It’s a community that’s misunderstood and it’s a rapidly changing and exciting area of the law,” Bruner said.

“There just aren’t a lot of lawyers who have the knowledge to be able to help that community.”

The other new projects funded this year provide legal services for torture survivors seeking asylum in the United States, young people in the juvenile justice system and domestic violence victims.

The full list of this year’s grantees is available [here](#).

\*May exclude some premium content

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